



## The Atomic Duo

Our **EXCLUSIVE** interview with Writers/Producers  
**Jeff Reno & Ron Osborn**

By Diana Maiocco

It was a beautiful, sunny day in Los Angeles on Wednesday, February 5, 2003 when I met with Jeff and Ron. It was also the end of a full working day for them but they happily made the time to meet with me to discuss their memories of writing and producing many classic *Moonlighting* episodes, including the acclaimed *Atomic Shakespeare*.

They considered their experience working on the series as a growth period for them as writers, which they attributed to Glenn's faith in them (Glenn certainly has an eye for talent, but we knew that).

Months before meeting with them, I had a few opportunities to speak to them over the phone and I found them to be very friendly and down-to-earth. So when I finally met them in person, I was comfortable and not at all nervous conducting the interview. They were very flattered to be interviewed but I was flattered when they told me they were fans of *Moonlighting Strangers*. You will see what I mean as you read on. Enjoy!

**DM: How did you two become writing partners?**

**Jeff:** Oh, that's a very embarrassing...

**Ron:** That's a very dark, dark sor-did story.

**DM: (laughs)**

**Ron:** It's funny. We met in a writing class years ago actually, and the teacher took a liking to the two of us, and suggested that we team up because producers are more partial to hiring teams than individual writers.

**Jeff:** But it was really a half-hour comedy writing class. When we were starting out, that's the class we happened to get in, and so particularly in sitcoms, you tend to get two people in the room coming up with jokes for the price of one, basically. So, he said it would be a good idea, and we just hit it off. Similar sensibilities, and all that...

**DM: So, it's perceived as a value then. Two people for the price of one?**

**Ron:** Yes, and, you know, as producers ourselves, all things being equal, if there's a talented team, or a talented individual, it's often cost effective to go to the team.

**DM: And how'd you get the job writing for *Moonlighting*?**

**Jeff:** We had done half-hour comedy for a few years. We'd done *Mork and Mindy*, and *Night Court*, and a few shows like that. And we

were at Warner Brothers, actually, doing *Night Court*, and we wrote a pilot for an hour-long drama with comedy in it, a romantic comedy detective show, actually. We liked our script, it was sort of our jump into hour-long, but it maintained the humor we've generally tried to keep in our work. The studio sort of changed it a little bit; put some other people on it because we were not experienced enough yet in hour-long to run the show. We didn't really like what became of it, but, at the same time, our agent got that script that we had written, our version of it, over to Glenn who was just putting a show together. He responded to it, and we met with him, and we were brought on. So, that was it.

**DM: So you were familiar with the show already? (In the meantime, the phone rings and Ron steps out to answer it.)**

**Jeff:** We had just seen the first few that were airing in the spring. Glenn didn't have a staff yet and we'd seen a couple of those, so we knew what it was, and, coincidentally, our pilot that we had written had similarities. It had the same kind of fast-paced bantery style to it and it was an hour-long detective show that was mostly about humor and romance.

**DM: It never got on the air, did it?**

**Jeff:** No. No, it didn't. But it was a very similar kind of thing.

**DM: Okay.**

**Jeff:** Just a rare moment of immodesty: we got asked to produce *Cheers* at the same time. We decided to leave *Night Court*. They wanted us back to produce that. We'd been there a year, and just didn't want to do that anymore. We sort of wanted to make a leap into something, and at the same time, *Cheers* had gotten hold of one of our scripts, and wanted us to come over, and we got the *Cheers* offer at the same time Glenn gave us the *Moonlighting* offer. This was in '85, I guess, so *Cheers* was going really strongly, and it was a great show. But we wanted to take a shot at something new because we had seen *Moonlighting*, and just thought, first of all, it was the best thing we had seen. It was really, really up our alley as writers. We had written a spec for *M\*A\*S\*H* to get into the business. And as I've said, that fast-paced banter was kind of a style we loved, and so we took a shot, and it worked out pretty well.

**DM: So, what was it about the show that appealed to you?**

**Jeff:** A lot of things, the writing style was a big one, and, obviously, Bruce and Cybill. You know, Bruce was really a breath of fresh air when he first came onto the scene.

**DM: Now, based on our interview with Glenn, who was very involved in every aspect of the show,**

**Jeff explains why he and Ron chose the title "Atomic" in *Atomic Shakespeare*. "I think it was simply Shakespeare for the 'atomic age' (i.e. modernized), with a small wordplay concerning the combustibility of their relationship."**

**what was your daily interaction with him like?**

**Ron:** Well, it morphed over time. I mean, early on, we came on just after the first few episodes were produced, and so we were trying to find the voice. As Jeff said, we started out in sitcom. We had had one adventure in hour-long dramatic writing. We immediately liked that style better. We felt it was really more about writing. We did not care for the set-up, punch line, three jokes a page kind of thing that we had been doing. Still, in terms of *Moonlighting*, there was definitely a learning curve adapting to this style. Also, Glenn was someone who, frankly, was new to running a show, and was not, I think, terrifically adept at using his staff in the best way possible, he didn't know how to delegate, and was overseeing every phase of production. You couldn't pin

him down, so you were kind of off by yourself writing quite a bit on that show, but in the second season, it was a pretty well-oiled machine. Actually, I would say, by mid-first season, it was a pretty well-oiled machine.

**Jeff:** Yeah. It was really after our second show that things started gelling between he and us, where we all started understanding that we were good for each other.

**Ron:** I will say, though, it was wonderful. And it was a terrific period because we grew as writers, you know, kind of making the leap, and we have to thank Glenn for having the faith in us, too, to make that leap.

**DM: What is the writing process like between the two of you?**

**Jeff:** Absolutely smooth and fluid.

**Ron:** Have you seen Israel and Palestine? (laughter) It's interesting. I don't know how other teams work necessarily. We have found that we can't write together in a room, per se.

**Jeff:** Not as effectively anyway, but we sort of do it for awhile on each project.

**Ron:** We generally prefer to work out the stories in great detail together. We split up the

material and we go off and write the scenes separately and then get together and coordinate.

**Jeff:** We go over each other's scenes. You get almost a built-in second draft that way before anyone gets to see it.

**Ron:** Yeah.

**DM: In our interview, Glenn said that the scripts went through his typewriter before they were filmed. What was that process like for both of you, and was that typical?**

**Jeff:** It's typical of most show runners on most TV shows. The truth is, it is a phrase Glenn has used a lot over the years and it really had a lot of different meanings. I would venture to say it had much less meaning with us. You know, going through his typewriter often meant really tiny little changes here and there along the way. I mean, we really, in all immodesty, reached a point where much of our material was being shot the way we sent it to him. He would nip and tuck or do a thing or two here and there. At other times, certainly with other writers, he would tend to do heavy rewrites after the first couple of drafts. Even in the beginning, though, for us he didn't rewrite as much as he gave us huge notes, and we had to do three or four drafts before our first episode came out. But he was in charge of all of that and he was certainly the final say on all



of it. But in Ron's and my case, which may or may not have been unique, I think fairly soon a great deal of what we were writing was what was being done on the show. From individual scenes in other people's early episodes, to a fair amount of (our fourth draft of) *Knowing Her*, to a high percentage of our material in our second show (*Bride of Tupperman*) on through.

**Ron:** For example, on *Atomic Shakespeare* possibly the largest production of the entire series, we had half the script finished when they started production and they were catching up, and we were just writing to stay ahead. I remember we had a bit of a slow down in the third act trying to crack it, and they caught up with us. So, you know, there wasn't a lot of time for rewrites at that point.

**DM: Yes. Actually, when I spoke to Will Mackenzie, who directed that episode, he said that it was very ambitious. He heard through Brandon Stoddard (President of ABC Entertainment at the time) that it was the most expensive hour of television. There were also first and second units directing.**

**Jeff:** Jay Daniel was directing a second unit almost as a first unit. It was being done that way.

**Ron:** In fact, I think the actual

shooting days came out to be about ten or twelve days.

**Jeff:** Well, the equivalent of sixteen is what I remember. I think we shot ten days and there were six full second unit days is my memory.

**DM: Yeah. Will said something like fourteen. It was probably around that much time.**

**Jeff:** It was a big production, and it was from costumes and sets on down. But a big part of the reason that it was expensive is because things were being done so last minute. The fact that things were put off so long in the show is the reason they tended to cost as much as they did. Because they couldn't prep, they just had to take what we all gave them very, very quickly.

**Ron:** We had a scene at the top of the fourth act that was actually a voice-over and a little animated line traveling across a map and it simply could not be done because it was too close to production. We knew nothing

about animation at that time. We have since done an animated show and realized that everything in animation takes months. But, you know, in our naivete, we simply wrote that, then realized it couldn't be done.

**DM: But, the episode did open up with a drawing of an Elizabethan town...**

**Ron:** Yeah.

**DM: And then it came to life.**

**Jeff:** That was always there, but the map was... do you remember the show very well?

**DM: Yes.**

**Jeff:** The part where they decide to go back to Padua for the wedding where Bruce and Cybill are going to travel back. That's the map that we were talking about.



**Foreplay is the only way to make head way in a relationship** We're almost sure that's what Petruchio was thinking while he pinned Kate to the floor in *Atomic Shakespeare*.